Fairbury's Most Nationally Famous Citizen

By: Dale C. Maley
For: Fairbury Blade newspaper
Date: March 3, 2020

At the age of fifty in 1853, Nathan Townsend purchased forty-four acres from the U.S. government. This land was located just east of Fairbury and just north of Route 24. He built a log cabin on this property. In the 1860 U.S. Census, Nathan was living on this land with his son George W. Townsend.

In 1861, son George W. Townsend married Sarah Ann Harper, in Livingston County. In 1866, son Francis Everett Townsend was born in a log cabin near his grandfather Nathan's land. This farmland, like the other farmland in the Fairbury area, was very wet and swampy until it was tiled in the 1880s.

Francis Townsend grew up in this log cabin and attended Rudd country school. In his autobiography, New Horizons, Townsend recounted what his life was like growing up in the Fairbury area in the 1870s. One of Townsend's earliest memories was being carried by his mother to the higher ground of the horse stable area during one of the periodic floods. He remembered watching his father wade hip-deep into the water that had invaded the barnyard during the night. His father untied the horses and drove them to higher ground.

Townsend said that during his childhood and youth, he would continuously shake in the summer with swamp malaria. They called it "ager" or "chills and fever." Townsend believed these illnesses kept him from developing into an athletic boy. Francis remembered how good it felt to his chill-wracked body when his mother carried him out to the sunny side of the house as a child. She would place him where she could keep an eye on him while she worked at her cheese-making or at the lye kettle, making soap for the family.

When Townsend was eighteen, in 1884, he remembers that his father had their farmland tiled a few years before that date. Tiling eliminated the swamp and the ailments that went with living in a wet area. Townsend's father decided that farming was too difficult of an occupation. The land his grandfather bought from the government for $2.50 an acre was sold for $55 an acre. Tiling the land changed it from worthless swampland into some of the most productive farmland on the planet. In 1884, Townsend's father decided to move the family to Nebraska and invest in a hardware store.

In Nebraska, Townsend studied a couple of years at a local school academy. Then he and his brother decided to strike out on their own. They first went to California and went into the hay business. They then went to work as ranch hands on a large Los Angeles ranch. Francis then worked in the Seattle area at various jobs, including a moving company. From 1890 through 1893, he went back to Nebraska and graduated from the Franklin Academy.

In 1893, Townsend tried his hand at farming near his sister in northwestern Kansas. He was not successful at farming and tried being a country school teacher. Townsend later worked about a year as a traveling salesman selling Home Comfort cooking ranges in Kansas. He saved his money and, at age thirty-one, started to attend medical school at Omaha Medical College in 1899. After finishing medical school, Townsend moved to Belle Fourche, South Dakota, and began practicing medicine. He met a widowed nurse, Wilhelmina Mollie Bogue, with a nine-year-old daughter. At the age of forty in 1906, he married Wilhelmina.

Townsend had personal health issues his whole life. After almost twenty harsh South Dakota winters, he decided to move to warmer Long Beach, California, in 1919. They moved to Los Angeles in 1938, so his granddaughter could live with them and attend college.

The Wall Street stock market crash of 1929 signaled the start of the Great Depression. Unemployment reached twenty-five percent. Millions of people were thrown out of work. A couple of years after the Depression started, Townsend looked out his kitchen window in Long Beach, California. He was horrified to see three elderly women scrounging for edible food scraps in garbage cans. Townsend then got the idea there should be a relief program for the aged. He thought the Industrial Revolution had eliminated the need for the very young and very old to have to work.

Townsend's idea was to have a government old-age pension plan that would pay each person over sixty a pension of $200 per month. This pension would be equivalent to $47,000 per year in today's dollars. Townsend also proposed the pension money had to be spent in the same month it was received to stimulate the economy.

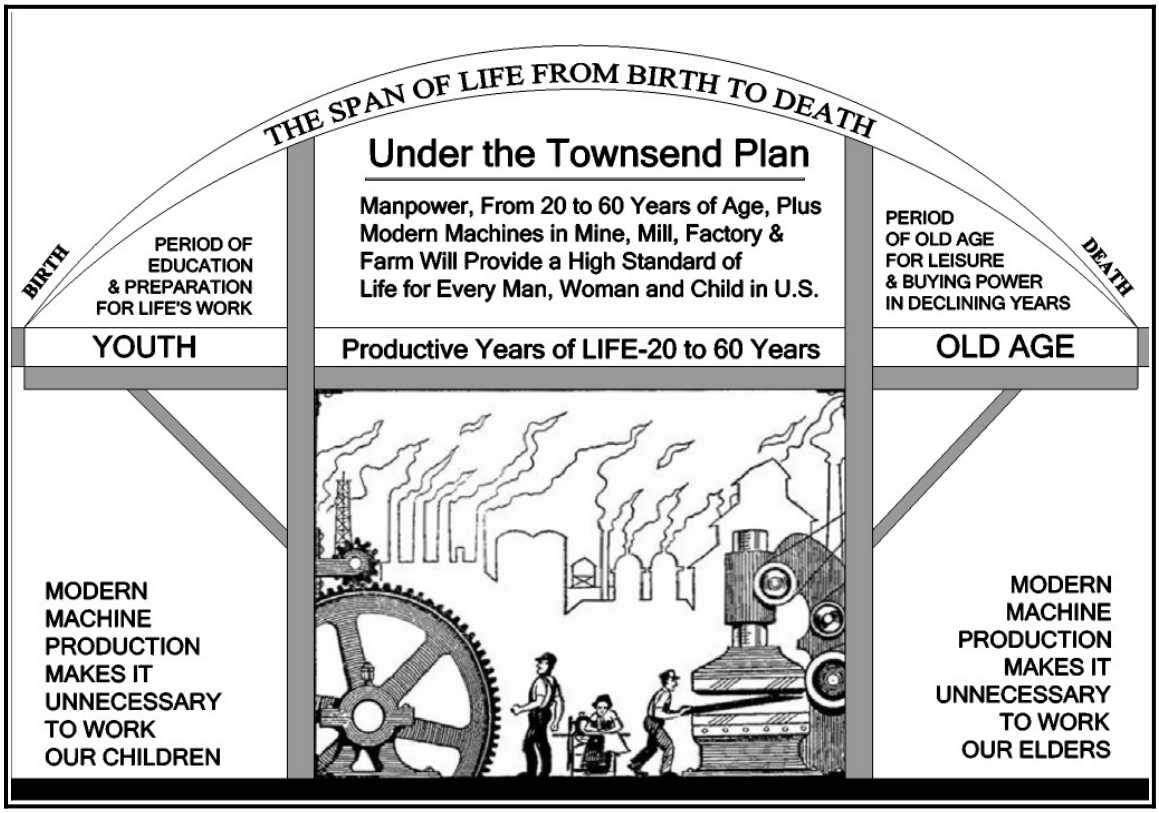
To pay for his new old-age pension plan, he suggested several alternatives, including a 3% income tax, a national sales tax, and a 2% tax on all transactions. Most economists said none of these proposed taxation methods would begin to pay for the $200 per month for the nine to twelve million people aged sixty or older.

Townsend began to promote his Townsend Plan for an old-age pension. It was wildly popular, and 3,400 Townsend Clubs sprung up overnight all over the country. His political movement put massive political pressure on President Roosevelt to adopt some type of old-age pension plan. This political pressure caused President Franklin D. Roosevelt to sign the original Social Security Act into law in 1935.

Initially, the Social Security system was funded by a two percent income tax. Today the employee and employer pay a total of 15.34% of earnings. Instead of Townsend's proposed pension of $47,000 at age sixty, the current system pays out an average of $16,400 to those over age sixty-five.

Townsend returned to Fairbury nine times from 1939 to 1947. The city celebrated this native son’s return with events called Townsend Homecomings. He died in 1960. He is

often called the father of the Social Security System. When you enter the Fairbury post office, look to your right, and you will see the Francis Townsend plaque. One of the five historic murals in Veteran's Memorial Park is also dedicated to Francis Townsend.


THE SPAN OF LIFE FROM BIRTH TO DEATH
BIRTH
DEATH
Under the Townsend Plan
Manpower, From 20 to 60 Years of Age, Plus Modern Machines in Mine, Mill, Factory & Farm Will Provide a High Standard of Life for Every Man, Woman and Child in U.S.
PERIOD OF EDUCATION & PREPARATION FOR LIFE'S WORK
PERIOD OF OLD AGE FOR LEISURE & BUYING POWER IN DECLINING YEARS
YOUTH
Productive Years of LIFE-20 to 60 Years
OLD AGE
MODERN MACHINE PRODUCTION MAKES IT UNNECESSARY TO WORK OUR CHILDREN
MODERN MACHINE PRODUCTION MAKES IT UNNECESSARY TO WORK OUR ELDERS

Mr. Townsend is on the left hand side of this photo. Taken at Fairbury one of the times he returned to visit his hometown.

Ninth Annual Homecoming.....

Dr. Francis E. Townsend

August 30-31, 1947

Fairbury, Illinois